

The Philippines

by Michel Braunstein

The Philippines is an archipelago situated in the Pacific Ocean, north of Indonesia, with a rich history. It is part of the coral triangle, along with Papua New Guinea and Indonesia.

This region is renowned for its abundant variety of fish and corals, with species reproducing at a faster rate than anywhere else in the world. In certain dive spots, scientists have identified over 70 different coral species, comparable to the total number found across the Caribbean. This uniqueness makes the Philippines a must-visit destination for divers. However, it's not just divers who would appreciate the country; it is also known for its natural beauty, hospitable people, and diverse activities beyond diving.

When discussing the Philippines with divers, the focus often centers on its rich macro life and vibrant nudibranchs, which is indeed noteworthy. However, there is much more to explore.

The Philippines boasts some of the most remarkable underwater macro life, alongside stunning reefs teeming with a wide array of fish species, from the tiniest to the largest, including whale sharks.

Wreck enthusiasts will discover some remarkable shipwrecks from the dark history of World War II. In 1944, the Japanese Navy stationed a large fleet in Coron Bay to evade American planes. However, they were eventually discovered and bombed. Some of these sunken ships have since become habitats for coral and marine life.

During my visit to the Philippines, I had the opportunity to explore only a fraction of its diverse and pristine dive sites. Here are some highlights from my journey:

Malapascua

Located in the northern part of Cebu, Malapascua Island offers incredible macro subjects, but its standout feature is the graceful thresher shark. These elegant creatures ascend from the depths to cleaning stations near the island every day. With their long tails and graceful movements, watching them feels like observing a dancer.

(Top) Diving the amazing Apo Island's reefs.

(Right) Thresher shark at Malapascua. Nikon D850 Nauticam Housing. Nikon 8-15 Lens at 15mm – F9 1/125 ISO 800





Mating Mandarin fish, Malapascua - Nikon D850 – Nauticam Housing – Nikon 105mm – 1 Ikelite Strobe DS230 + 1 Ikelite DS125 – F22 1/125 ISO 125

Maintaining proper buoyancy is crucial when diving at Kimud Shoal to avoid damaging the reef. Photographers refrain from using flashes to prevent startling the sharks and making them go away.

Thresher sharks are not easy to approach closely. You must be patient and remain quiet. Eventually, they become more confident, and they may come quite near. Suddenly, you might observe their long tails swaying above your head.

The reef around Malapascua also boasts an impressive mandarin fish habitat. These colorful creatures

emerge from their hiding spots at night to mate, requiring patience and the use of red light for photography. White light would prevent them from going out.

I spent over 70 minutes stuck in the same spot, waiting to observe and photograph these fish. What an enjoyable experience it was to see them emerge for a few seconds and strive to capture the perfect shot. It was truly exciting. However, enduring the freezing temperatures without moving for such a long time was quite challenging. Returning to the dive center and warming up under a



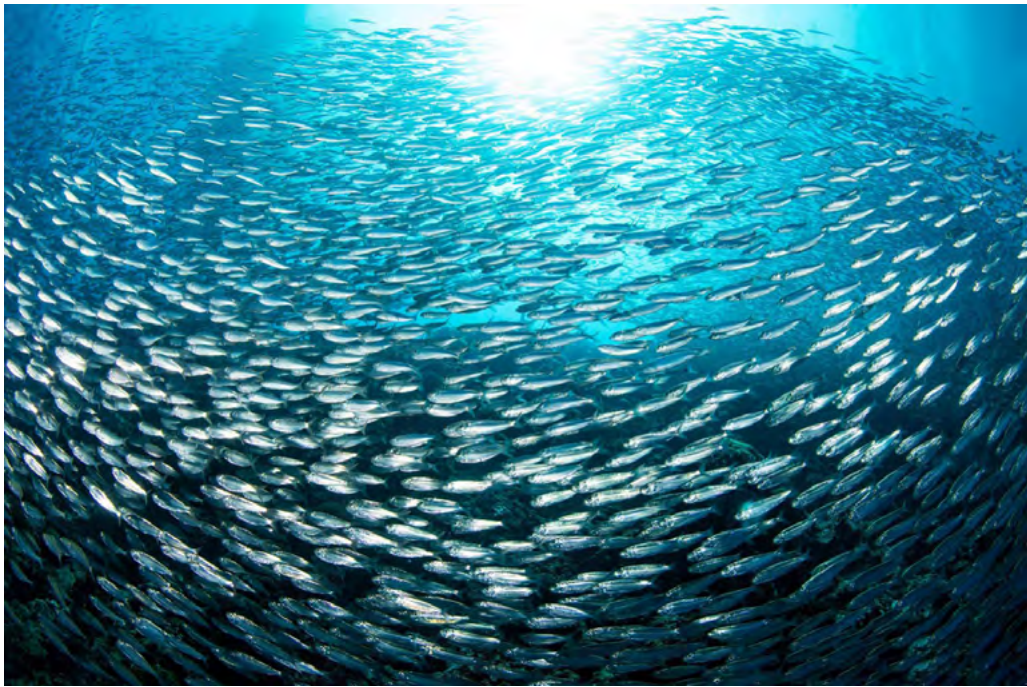
Crabs hug, Malapascua Nikon D850 – Nauticam Housing – Nikon 105mm – 1 Ikelite Strobe DS230 + 1 Ikelite DS125 – F22 1/125 ISO 125

refreshing shower was no less enjoyable.

The reefs around Malapascua Island are teeming with various types of marine life. Among them, the seahorses stand out with all kinds of vibrant colors. Additionally, I witnessed a touching scene of a crab embracing its offspring. Both creatures gazed at me, the small one nestled in the embrace of the larger one.

I had the chance to dive there together with Evolution Resort.





Sardine run, Moalboal – Nikon D850 – Nauticam Housing – Nikon Fisheye Lens 8-15 at 15mm – 1 Ikelite Strobe DS230 + 1 Ikelite DS125 – F9 1/200 ISO 200

Moalboal

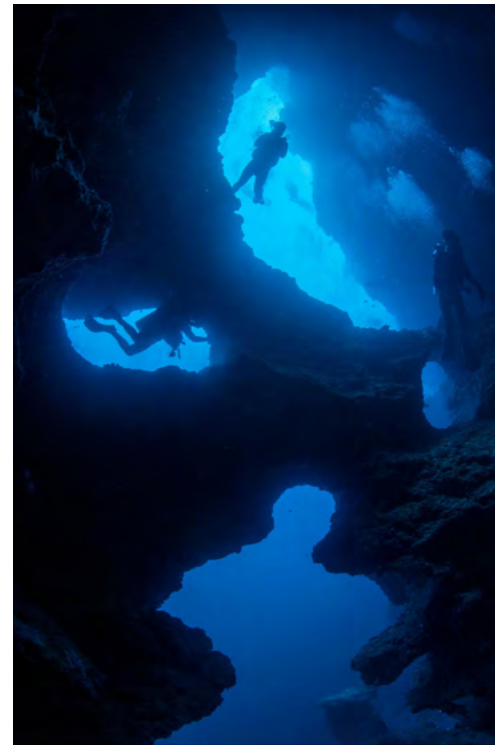
Another gem in Cebu, Moalboal, located at 5-6 hours drive from Malapascua, is home to a permanent shoal of sardines, offering a breathtaking sight as they move together in unison. Some days, a few jacks invite themselves to feed on that attractive food reserve.

Sardine runs are well-known in Eastern South Africa and in Baja, Mexico. The sardine run in the Philippines is less renowned than those, but no less impressive! Imagine being surrounded by a massive cloud of sardines... it's truly awe-inspiring!

While striving to capture the perfect shot, I found myself following the shoal up and down. My dive profile serves as a cautionary example for young divers, illustrating what not to do. Therefore, if you're a photographer, prioritize safety and be vigilant about monitoring your depth gauge.

Nearby Moalboal, Pescador Island features vibrant reefs teeming with marine life, including an awe-inspiring cave formation that resembles a face when viewed from within.

Furthermore, the Kawasan



Pescador Island's cave– Nikon D850 – Nauticam Housing – Nikon Fisheye Lens 8-15 at 15mm – F9 1/125 ISO 1000

Waterfalls, easily accessible from Moalboal with tricycles (local taxis), provide exhilarating opportunities for canyoneering. Highly recommended! I visited there with my two sons for a trek through the mountains and water, engaging in jumps from various heights into the water (sometimes quite high!). It was incredibly enjoyable! Undoubtedly, it became my sons' most cherished experience!



Oslob's gentle whale shark - Nikon D850 – Nauticam Housing – Nikon 8-15 Lens at 15mm – 1 Ikelite Strobe DS230 + 1 Ikelite DS125 – F9 1/125 ISO 320

Oslob

Known for its whale sharks, Oslob in Cebu provides an unforgettable encounter with these gentle giants. Unlike anywhere else I've dived, Oslob boasts a congregation of nearly 20 whale sharks, creating an incredibly immersive experience. Whether snorkeling or scuba diving, being in such close proximity to these majestic creatures is an unparalleled adventure.



Oslob's whale sharks - Nikon D850 – Nauticam Housing – Nikon Fisheye Lens 8-15 at 15mm – 1 Ikelite Strobe DS230 + 1 Ikelite DS125 – F8 1/125 ISO 320



Coleman Shrimps, Dumaguette - Nikon D850 – Nauticam Housing – Nikon 105mm – 1 Ikelite Strobe DS230 + 1 Ikelite DS125 – F22 1/100 ISO 100

I've had the opportunity to dive with whale sharks in numerous locations around the world, including the Red Sea, the Maldives, and the Galapagos Islands. However, I had never before encountered such a large number of them in one place. It was incredibly thrilling to be surrounded by dozens of these magnificent creatures, ranging from large adults to small juveniles.

Throughout my dives in Malapascua, Moalboal, and Oslob, the experienced guides from Kasai Village ensured a safe and memorable experience.

Dumaguete

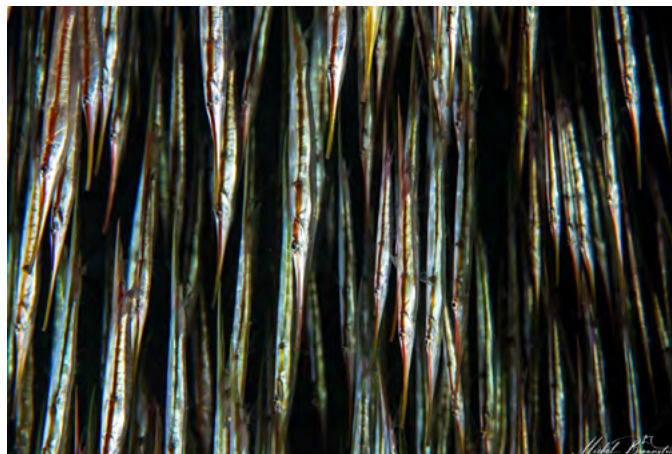
Our last destination was this pristine, world-class diving location known for its macro muck diving. Here, you can encounter nearly anything you've ever dreamed of seeing in macro marine life. While not everything, you'll find a plethora of tiny living creatures such as shrimps, slugs, seahorses, nudibranchs, and many more.

The Coleman shrimp, nestled on starfish, is truly remarkable. Its appearance resembles that of a painting and is perhaps the most colorful among all the creatures in that area.

For the first time ever, in Dumaguette I could experience a blackwater dive. The Philippines is renowned for such dives. We ventured far from the shore aboard a boat, where our divemaster positioned a buoy on the sea surface with a long cord descending into the depths. Several torches were attached to the cord to



Anemone fish and eggs, Dumaguette - Nikon D850 – Nauticam Housing – Nikon 105mm – 1 Ikelite Strobe DS230 + 1 Ikelite DS125 – F22 1/125 ISO 100



(Left) Blackwater dive in Dumaguette - Nikon D850 – Nauticam Housing – Nikon 105mm – 1 Ikelite Strobe DS230 + 1 Ikelite DS125 – F18 1/125 ISO 100

(Above) These razor fish didn't want to leave me during my last dive in Dumaguete. They were hovering above my head (I felt them picking with their needle nose) and even between my face and the camera. They seemed to adopt me, sticking close until I exited the water - Nikon D850 – Nauticam Housing – Nikon 105mm – 1 Ikelite Strobe DS230 + 1 Ikelite DS125 – F22 1/100 ISO 100

(Above right) Locals get to our boats with canoes to sell some nice T-shirts and scarfs in Apo Island

attract fish. As we descended into the darkness, we encountered a myriad of creatures that are rarely seen. It felt like encountering denizens of the deep sea. However, focusing on them proved challenging due to their swift movements.

Additionally, just an hour's boat ride away from Dumaguete lies Apo Island, renowned for its rich reef teeming with diverse hard and soft corals, along with an abundance of marine life including

various fish species, turtles, and sea snakes. Locals get to our boats with canoes to sell some nice T-shirts and scarfs. A visit to Apo Island is a must!

During my last night dive in Dumaguete, I encountered a shoal of razorfish. After capturing some images of them, I continued my dive. Throughout the dive, I felt the razorfish swimming around me, they were hovering above my head (I felt them picking with their needle nose) and even

between my face and the camera. They seemed to adopt me, sticking close until I exited the water.

The super pros Atlantis Dumaguette have organized all the amazing dives we did in the region.

Good to know

The Philippines is a welcoming country where people are exceptionally kind and helpful. Diving conditions are favorable almost year-round. Shorty or 3mm wetsuit is perfect in most of the regions.

The primary language spoken is Tagalog, a blend of the local language, Spanish, and some English. English is widely understood, making communication easy for travelers. The influence of Spanish colonization since 1521 is evident in the local language, including the adoption of Spanish words and even the currency, the "peso."

If you haven't dived in the Philippines yet, add it to your bucket list! Even if you're not a diver, consider adding this amazing country to your bucket list. You won't be disappointed!

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